

Three women share the fight in war, cancer

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LSA ANACONDA, Iraq – It's hard to find someone who hasn't had their own life or a family member's affected by cancer, but adding that struggle to the stress of war can magnify the effect of the disease.

Maj. Kathy A. Shear, Sgt. 1st Class Carolina Castle, and Sgt. Sonia M. Rodriguez, have a lot in common. All three women participated in LSA Anaconda's recent Relay for Life event Aug. 18, and all three have survived years of struggle with cancer. They are women who are not only serving their country in Iraq, but are doing it in spite of a personal battle – cancer.

A clash with the sun

Shear, a native of Warnerville, N.Y., and deputy operations officer for 3rd Corps Support Command, has been battling cancerous basal cells since 1999. Shear first noticed reddish blemishes on her forehead that year, but ignored them for six more years.

"I continued to enjoy the sun every chance I got, not knowing that the sun was fueling the cancer," Shear said.

Last May, she went to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in Washington, D.C., to have the blemishes looked at, and it was then that she learned they were cancerous.

Shear had the mass removed, but was left with a two-centimeter hole in her forehead, and a flap made of her own skin to cover the hole.

"I see the scar every time I look in the mirror," Shear said.

She was told that a reoccurrence of cancer was very likely within five years, but Shear found a new outbreak of cells only five weeks after her initial surgery.

Those were also removed, but Shear found still more cancerous cells just before deploying to Iraq in October of 2005. When Shear returns home, she will once again go through the process of finding out if the cells on her forehead are cancerous.

"There are so many people in the armed forces that are cancer survivors and until I had cancer, I had no idea how many there are," she said.

Shear, whose mother is also a cancer survivor, stresses the importance of being educated about the disease.

"It is so important to educate the public on this deadly disease," Shear said. "My advice is that something that doesn't seem normal, probably isn't."

She refuses to let cancer defeat her positive attitude, and this fight has reinforced her outlook on life.

"Being deployed has made me realize that life is entirely too short to worry about the small challenges and things that we deal with on a daily basis," she said. "I believe that God does not provide you with obstacles he does not feel you can handle."

Shear is confident that cancer will not gain any ground in her life, and that one day a cure will be found.

"I will overcome this challenge and endure the anesthetic needles in my forehead and the slicing away of my skin because I refuse for it to win in any form or fashion," she said.

Helping find a cure

Castle, from Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., an operations non-commissioned officer with the 50th Engineer Company, was first diagnosed with leukemia at 3 years old. She continued to

receive chemotherapy until the age of 6. Her mother was diagnosed with throat cancer and died in 1974, followed by Castle's father's death from lung and kidney cancer in 1986.

"Since the loss of my folks, I have felt like I cheated them," Castle said. "Not loving them enough, and cancer should have taken me instead. I didn't do enough to save them ... these thoughts have haunted me for years."

Castle has been involved in Relay for Life events since 1989 and has used them as a way to deal with the loss related to cancer in her family.

"I decided to turn my negative frustration into

some positive constructive production," she said.

She said that fighting against cancer has helped her build up her honor, dignity, discipline, and courage.

"My Papo taught me not to be afraid," Castle said. "He used to say: 'When life gets tough, don't step back. Observe, adapt, and find a way to get through. Don't ever get lazy because that is just an excuse to not succeed.'"

Castle was a key player in organizing the Relay for Life event here Aug. 18. More than 600 servicemembers took part in the event which raised more than \$24,000 for cancer research.

"Goodness, a Relay for Life in Iraq ... Life is good," she said. "I really hope my folks were watching because this is something to talk about for years to come."

To anyone who is suffering from cancer, Castle offers the advice to not shy away from it and stay strong through treatments.

"You are scared, and you are feeling alone," Castle said. "You're not (alone)."

Castle gives the guidance to never give up fighting the disease and to make the most out of life.

"I am no fortune teller, but I do know that life is too short –don't waste it," she said.

Fighting for her child

Rodriguez, from Long Beach, Calif., a noncommissioned officer with the 650th Transportation Control Detachment, did not have cancer herself, but both her mother and young son were diagnosed with the disease.

Rodriguez's mother passed away from breast cancer when Rodriguez was a junior in high school, after battling with the disease for six years.



Maj. Kathy A. Shear

hospital," Rodriguez said. "My mother spent exactly one week in Mexico before she passed away."

"It was really hard for me, but my mother's death showed me how strong I could really be," she said.

Her son, Carlos, was diagnosed in 2002 with a different form of cancer—leukemia. He was 3 years old when they caught the disease in its early stages, and he continued to receive treatment for the next three years.

"It was hard to explain to my son why he was sick, but after a thorough explanation, he understood," she said.

It was a happy day for Rodriguez when, two days before mobilizing for this deployment, she received a phone call that her son was officially declared free of the disease, she said.

"My son's recovery made me believe in medicine again, a belief I had lost when my mother lost her battle," she said.

Rodriguez recommends that anyone in her position study the disease they are dealing with. She said she researched breast cancer and leukemia, and that knowledge gave her a better understanding on what to expect.

Thoughts for the future

These women have all faced heartache and challenges through their fight against cancer, but have all refused to let the disease defeat them.

"It takes continued dedication, promotion, and education of this disease in order to fight against it and win," Shear said. "I look forward to the day when there is a 100 percent cure rate."

Castle plans to continue participating in Relay for Life events in the hope that one day a cure will be found.

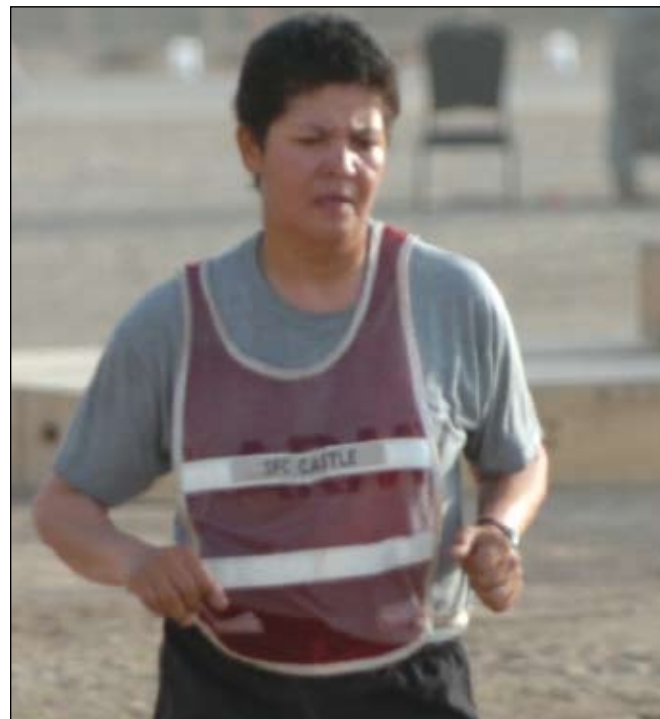
"Life is too short, and the beauty of traveling through it is the mystery of not knowing when your turn comes up," she said. "Don't worry about that; love, and life will be enriched."

Rodriguez said she hopes telling her story will help others get through the pain and trauma that comes with the disease.

"Even though my mother lost her battle with cancer, knowing she struggled to stay strong for her children and maintain our household so we still felt like a family, makes me feel positive that I can handle anything that comes my way - including this deployment," Rodriguez said.



Sgt. Sonia M. Rodriguez



Sgt. 1st Class Carolina Castle